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Op-Ed: Zen and the Art of Social Selfishness

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The German word “*Gemuetlichkeit*” loosely translated means “cozy sociability,” or in our terms, that soft warm place where all is good. The European Union (EU), when formalized after the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, was to be *gemuetlichkeit*. But today, Germany, as well as many other EU countries, is running out of patience with nations, such as Greece and Portugal, who have plunged into economic crisis. The frustration is exacerbated by Greece's unwillingness to tighten its belt and make some tough economic decisions like reforming the government retirement systems.

A planned meeting with the EU Finance Ministers scheduled for the end of February 2012 was canceled and the EU Economic Summit scheduled for March 2012 is canceled as well. Finance ministers throughout Europe are canceling meetings and arming themselves for the worst case scenario. The countries with a perfect triple A credit rating are becoming very uncertain that Greece will honor its obligations. Leaders are becoming more agreeable to let Greece go bankrupt so as to put up a firewall of trust between Greece and the remainder of the union. Some German business leaders have even called for Greece to be expelled from the EU, which most likely would plunge the union into further disarray, due to the apparent reality that weaker member states get “voted off the island” by the stronger. Even so, the reaction in Athens is still troubling.

Last month we observed another round of civilian unrest and violence that we haven't seen for a very long time on the Ionian peninsula. Is what we are seeing in Athens a spillover from the Arab Spring that is now occurring on the other side of the Mediterranean? If Greece were to fail, what would be the effects on the EU?

What we see developing is the potential for another perfect storm, similar to the ones that occurred in Europe during the 20th century, the result of which led to two devastating wars. Additionally, the region narrowly avoided a third war—the Balkans—at the end of that century. While this perfect storm develops, the focus of the United States is elsewhere—toward the Pacific Rim and how we can leave Central Asia with the least amount of delay. However, a failing Europe ought to make one pause.

Many believe the potential for the EU to fail is a self-inflicted wound brought on by extreme social programs which drained the lifeblood of the union. Many will say that the experiment where Europe would become a “United States of Europe” has failed; many will say that it should rightly fail. Perhaps, but there are significant consequences to a failing EU, all of which will negatively affect the United States.

The United States receives the most Allied support from Europe, followed, of course, by Australia. If Europe fails economically, then our greatest pool of Allies, the people to whom many Americans can trace their ancestral roots, becomes unstable. The United States will then be left more alone than at any other time in our history to deal with emerging threats. Also, failure of the EU would negatively affect NATO and those former Warsaw Pact nations still emerging from the Cold War.

All Allies

Instability in Europe is more of a concern to our security interests than anything simmering in the Middle East. We should view the development in Europe for what it is: a very serious national security concern for the United States.

The economic impact to the United States of a failed EU would be devastating. If the weaker economies fail in the EU, then the stronger economies like Germany and France will also begin to decline. Recently, Germany posted its first decline since 2009, despite the prediction of the German Finance Minister that Europe is better able to deal with an imploding Greece than it was 2 years ago. If the weaker economies bring down the stronger, then the entire EU has the potential to collapse into similar chaos that we see in Athens. If 2011 was the year of the Arab Spring, 2012 may be the year of a European Spring. However, the former was an assertion by the people to change

the status quo, while what we see in Athens is an assertion to maintain the status quo of social selfishness. An economic failure of the EU will negatively affect our economy just as we begin to see, however so slight, an upturn.

It is true that the emergence of China and India, as Far East economic hegemons, is a concern. But the economic failure of those that we are most closely allied with should be of even more concern. The strategic genre that we found ourselves in during the 20th century was focused on the spread of communism and the danger associated with nuclear weaponry. Today's genre is more subtle and is centered on economics. At a time when our focus is pointed toward the economic rise in the East, we should not neglect what is declining in the West.

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